



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

## LITERATURE UNVEILED<sup>1</sup>

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

---

THE Comic Spirit is a tethered filly these days—or at most she is goaded into becoming an Irish bull and uttering a horse laugh of cynical derision at the international spectacle; yet we cannot but think (to change again the metaphorical gear) that one of her old-time silvery peals would result from her observation of that moment in Mr. Albert Mordell's psychoanalytical unveiling of the Literary Great wherein he seeks to give us the Freudian view of Browning. Reading Mr. Mordell's blithely Boccaccioistic diagnosis of *The Last Ride Together*, and remembering the generation of austerely puritan Browning Clubs that guilelessly exposed themselves to this apparently innocent poem of the master's, one cannot but join in concert with those relaxing peals of pure joy. Browning, Mr. Mordell remarks, "wrote rarely of sex"; but he warns us against "those innocent poems of the poet where we have no doubt there must be sex symbolism." Of course it is precisely in these seemingly "innocent" aesthetic expressions (as every good Freudian knows) that that ubiquitous Bolshevik, Suppressed Libido, is most divertingly concealed.

We shall not dull the edge of the classic Browningite's reaction to Mr. Mordell's interpretation of *The Last Ride Together* by attempting a conveyance of it. We should perhaps not be thanked. Certainly Mr. Mordell will not be. But then he is not writing primarily for the Elderly Virgins of culture, either male or female. "The critic who examines literary masterpieces to find sexual symbols will not be a popular one," he admits; "but that does not

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Erotic Motive in Literature*, by Albert Mordell. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919.

alter the fact that the sexual meaning is there. The field will no doubt be taken up in the future by some critic who will not fear to brave public wrath." Who could say that Mr. Mordell is afraid? Yet, faithful Freudian that he is, he knows that insistence upon the sexual aspect of this matter of aesthetic psychomancy is about as soothing to the Elderly Virgins of culture as a red flag to a stock-broker. He remembers, no doubt, what Hitschmann says in the introduction to his *Freud's Theories of the Neuroses*: that "by far the greatest and most universal opposition raised against the Freudian doctrines has been because of the disclosure of an unfailing sexual agency in the causation of neurotic manifestations. Here the resistance, a normal one, lies in the nature of the thing itself, since both healthy and slightly neurotic individuals are inclined for intelligible reasons to deny the paramount importance of sexuality: the healthy, because it constitutes no problem for them; the others, because of their unconscious need to spread a veil over their own weaknesses. . . ." Such protestants "stand under the ban of that combination of prudery and lust which governs the attitude of most cultivated people in sexual matters." Those who recoil from this phase of Freud's theory of the strict determinism of all psychic processes are betrayed, as Hitschmann points out, by their narrow reading of the term "sexual." As Freud uses it, and as his literary disciple Mr. Mordell uses it, all but the ingenuous and the bigoted understand a denotement not only of the physical activities of the sexual life, but also of its "phantasies"—its psychic overtones.

Such elementary clarifications as these, which Mr. Mordell is at pains to make before he gets under way in his study, are, naturally, commonplaces to the student of modern explorations into the unconscious. No doubt Mr. Mordell had to establish certain comforting premises. It would have been heartless not to reassure those who will be horrified by his cheerful juggling with such terrifying verbal spheroids as "sadism," "narcissism," "masochist," "homosexualist"; yet we cannot help wishing that, after observing that "the ideas advanced here will displease the puritanical opponents of scientific research," he had refrained from adding this unctuous sop: "The 'unconscious,' besides containing the seeds of crime and immorality, also is the soil of all those finer emotions that the church and the state

cherish." The survivors of a million Browning Clubs will need much more detailed and emphatic reassurance than is to be found in that pious gesture before they can forgive Mr. Mordell for his unveiling of *The Last Ride Together*.

Mr. Mordell's book provides rare sport. Mainly, because of the joyous enthusiasm with which he seeks to demonstrate his thesis that "many writers who were deemed respectable and pure because they never dealt with sexual problems are full of sex symbolism. They consciously strove to conceal their sex interest, but their unconscious use of sex symbolism shows that they were not as indifferent to the problems as they would lead us to imagine." Obviously, his book would have been comparatively unrewarding if he had confined himself to such easy game as Burns, Byron, Rousseau, D'Annunzio, Heine, De Musset, Whitman, Verlaine, and the rest of the passional declaratives. Mr. Mordell deals with this familiar type, as a matter of course, but his principal quarry lies in other fields. Packing his complete set of Freud in a not too cumbersome grip, stuffing in his pocket a capacious note-book already crammed with voluminous observations on the Technique of Psychoanalysis, the Compulsion Neurosis, the Œdipus Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery, the Nature and Mechanism of the Obsessional Neurosis, Unconscious Consolatory Mechanisms, the Reaction Impulse and Infantile Regression, etc., etc., and emitting the glad cry of the pursuing Freudian following a scent, he sets forth hot-foot after such unsuspecting victims as Dickens and Wordsworth, Cowper and Keats, Tennyson, Longfellow, Charles Lamb.

The chase is delectable indeed. Let us see, for example, how Mr. Mordell goes after the author of that earliest of Prohibition lyrics, *Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes*. "The repression of the libido," preambles Mr. Mordell, "includes the damming and clogging up of all the emotional concomitants that go with sexual attraction and make up the feeling called love. Whenever, then, sex or libido is referred to in psychoanalysis the word has the widest meaning. The man who loves a woman with the greatest affection and passion, without gratifying these, suffers a repression of the libido, as well as the man who satisfies certain proclivities without feeling any tenderness or love for the woman. In the attraction for the other sex called love, in which admiration, respect, self-sacrifice, tenderness and

other finer feelings play a great part, there is consciously or unconsciously, however, the physical attraction. If this is totally absent the emotion cannot be called 'love.' What differentiates our feelings towards one of the opposite sex from those felt for one of the same sex (assuming there are no homosexual leanings) is the presence of this sexual interest. Love, then, must satisfy a man physically as well as psychically. It is a concentration of the libido upon a person of the opposite sex, accompanied by tender feelings. Hence when we read the most chaste love poem, we see what is the underlying motive in the poet's 'unconscious.' He may write with utter devotion to the loved one and express a wish to die for her, and though he says nothing about physical attraction, we all know that it is there in his 'unconscious.' It is taken for granted that a man who writes a real love poem to a girl wants to enjoy her love. And when the poet complains because he is rejected or deceived, or of something interfering with the course of his love, we are aware also that his 'unconscious' is grieved because his union is impeded or entirely precluded. The suffering is greater the more he loves, for his finer instincts, as well as his passion, are prevented from being fulfilled."

True, too true. And now we are ready for Ben Jonson and his disguised temperance propaganda. "Let us take at random," says Mr. Mordell with disarming candor, at the same time creeping up silently behind his victim, "a few innocent poems, and test the theory. There is Ben Jonson's well-known toast, *Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes*. He tells how he sent Celia a rose wreath, that she breathed on it and sent it back to him.

Since when, it grows, and smells, I swear,  
Not of itself but thee.

"It is well known in science what a great part odour plays in sexual attraction. In this poem the poet, after having received the returned rose breathed upon by Celia, smells her perfume, which now submerges the natural fragrance of the rose. In other words, the poet's 'unconscious' says that he wishes to possess Celia physically. He is talking symbolically in the poem." That is as pretty a demonstration as one could desire, is it not?

Then again, take Tennyson. Recall the song in *The Miller's Daughter*. The poem begins innocuously:

It is the miller's daughter.

But Mr. Mordell is too shrewd a Freudian to be deceived by such Victorian window-dressing. There is more here than meets the eye. The poet says—naïvely enough, discreetly enough, you would think—that he would like to be the jewel in the ear of the miller's daughter in order to touch her cheek, the girdle about her waist—

I'd clasp it round so close and tight—

and the necklace upon her bosom to fall and rise—

I would lie so light, so light.

At this point Mr. Mordell engages his victim, wielding his scalpel with exquisite deftness. "The unconscious sexual feelings here are only too apparent," he says. "The symbols of the earring, girdle and necklace are unmistakable. The poet is saying in a symbolical manner that he would possess the miller's daughter."

And how fares the stainless muse of Longfellow? Surely there is no Obsessional Neurosis in that sweetly decorous breast? Surely a Suppressed Libido would perish of inanition in that placid inner chamber of the poet's soul? Be not deceived. Attend to the remorseless probing of Mr. Mordell: "One may see the sex motive in poems where it does not seem to appear. If certain facts in an author's life are known, we may discern the unconscious love sentiments in poems where no mention seems to be made of them. Let me illustrate with a fine poem by Longfellow, the familiar *The Bridge*. Take the lines:

How often, oh how often,  
I had wished that the ebbing tide  
Would bear me away in its bosom  
O'er the ocean wild and wide!

For my heart was hot and restless,  
And my life was full of care,  
And the burden laid upon me  
Seemed greater than I could bear.

But now it has fallen from me, etc.

"To the student of Longfellow, this poem speaks of the time he found it difficult to win the love of his second wife. . . . He married her July 13, 1843. He finished the poem Oc-

tober 9, 1845. At the end of this year he wrote in his diary that now he had love fulfilled and his soul was enriched with affection. He is therefore thinking of the time when he had no love and longed for it, and now that he has it, he is thinking of the love troubles of others. In the olden days he wanted to be carried away by the river Charles, for his long courtship, seemingly hopeless, made his heart hot and restless and his life full of care. So we see that in this poem the poet was thinking of something definite, relating to love (and hence also sex); though there is no mention of either in the poem."

Sometimes, however, Mr. Mordell is too rashly assumptive. If we are Freudians, he says, we will conclude that Herbert Spencer does not tell us the whole truth when in his *Autobiography* he ascribes his nervous breakdown to hard work. "We know that most cases of breakdown have had a previous history, usually in some love or sex repression. We are aware that Spencer was a bachelor who never had his craving for love satisfied, and probably led a celibate life. This led to his nervous troubles. This is merely one instance where by the aid of psychoanalysis we can read more than the author reveals."

Well, *we* are Freudians, too, and we dissent. Would not Freud, a lover of scientific precision, read with a blush such loose and slipshod assertion on the part of a professed disciple? Spencer "probably" led a celibate life, and "This led to his nervous troubles"! Mr. Mordell should know that such blandly irresponsible writing discredits genuine scientific investigation.

And does not Mr. Mordell follow Max Graf too uncritically when he says that "psychoanalysis will show us . . . why Wagner dealt with themes like the woman between two men"? Bless your subtle heart, Mr. Mordell! Is that theme peculiar to Wagner? Is it not, probably, the commonest of all dramatic situations? Further, does he intend us to understand that psychoanalysis reveals Shelley's social and political radicalism as having resulted from his disappointment in love? "He hated intolerance, religion and monarchy," says Mr. Mordell, "because by his heterodoxy and the offence it gave to Harriet Grove's parents, he lost her." In the eleventh canto of *The Revolt of Islam*, Mr. Mordell points out, Shelley "describes the agonies of his lost love, with Harriet Grove in mind, no doubt. This

poem was written in the summer of 1817. Shelley then became an uncompromising reformer; he had suffered in love, on account of the hostility and sorrow he met because of his radical ideas, *hence he would make it his aim to spread the views which he held so that in the future other lovers should not lose their sweethearts because of liberal notions.*" We think that this is unduly naïve.

The trouble with such bald and ingenuous applications of the Freudian technique as Mr. Mordell too often perpetrates is that they are discouraging to those who are trying to promote a more intelligent public attitude toward the problems of what William James called "an entirely unsuspected peculiarity in the constitution of human nature." Mr. Mordell deserves well of all students of psychoanalytic experiment by reason of his honesty, his inexhaustible curiosity, his gusto, his complete conviction. He has produced an unexampled book, challenging and provocative. But we wish he had spent another ten years on it. And we wish he had omitted such uneasily deprecatory sentences as the last of these: "It is therefore true to say that in the tenderest and sweetest love lyrics, like those of Burns and Shelley for instance, one sees the play of unconscious sexual forces. *This fact does not make the poem any the less moral or the poet any the less pure.*" Is Mr. Mordell afflicted with the Presbyterian Complex?

LAWRENCE GILMAN.